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The Catholic Physician and Morality in Contemporary Society

Most Reverend Lawrence J. Riley, S.T.D., LL.D

Bishop Riley, of Boston, presented this address at the October, 1978 meeting of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds.

At the outset, let me express my sincere gratitude for the opportunity to speak at this convention in New Orleans, and to pay tribute to all of you, members of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds. By your innate talent and years of training and experience, by your dedication, devotion and self-sacrifice, by your public profession of, and adherence to, the moral and ethical principles of Catholicism as they apply to the practice of medicine, you are indeed striving to pattern your lives upon the life of Jesus Christ, the Healer of broken bodies and the Consoler of anguished hearts.

Less than a year ago our late Holy Father Pope Paul VI spoke in the highest terms of the medical profession: "In the fabric of our civilization," he said, "there exists a class of learned, valiant and good-hearted persons who have made the science and art of medicine their vocation and profession. They are the doctors, and those who study and work with them and under their direction for the sake of the existence and welfare of humanity. Honor and gratitude to those wise and generous guardians of human life" (*Origins*, Jan. 5, 1978, p. 453).

Pope Paul spoke of the medical profession in general. What is to be said about the Catholic physician in particular? The eminent American moral theologian, the late Fr. Francis Connell, C.S.S.R., once wrote: "A doctor should ever bear in mind the dignity and the importance of the task of caring for the human body. A certain measure of respect and admiration for the body, as a marvelously fashioned and beautifully functioning specimen of animal life, is possible even on the part of an atheistic physician. But only a doctor who is firm in the conviction that the body whose ills he is treating is the dwelling place of an immortal soul imaging God Himself, can be fully impressed with the exalted nature of his profession. And the highest appreciation of the

sacred dignity attached to the medical calling is found in the doctor possessing a strong Catholic faith, who regards the human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, sanctified by the sacraments, destined ultimately to a glorious resurrection and to immortal bliss in heaven" (Francis J. Connell, *Morals in Politics and Professions*, p. 115).

The progress of medicine in the 20th century has been nothing short of phenomenal — progress, vast in extent and diversified in character, not only in the field of medicine itself, but likewise in numerous ancillary sciences which contribute to medicine. The forward surge of medicine has eventuated in the prevention as well as the cure of disease, with a prodigious effectiveness far beyond the hopes and even the dreams of past ages.

And yet, despite these remarkable achievements, even the most cursory observer becomes aware of certain disturbing factors that are all too prevalent in the medical field. In many quarters, and to such an extent as to cause real anxiety and alarm, sometimes insidiously and at other times flagrantly, a spirit of crass naturalism and materialism and positivism and amorality has invaded 20th century medicine. The thought that someone expressed a few years ago with regard to science in general, can in many cases be applied to medicine: "No one — not even the most brilliant scientist alive today — really knows where science is taking us. We are aboard a train which is gathering speed, racing down a track on which there are an unknown number of switches leading to unknown destinations" (Ralph E. Lepp, *The New Priesthood: The Scientific Elite and the Uses of Power*, p. 29.)

I think that it is appropriate on the occasion of this convention to restate certain fundamental principles that must ever be the guiding beacons for those whose vocation is the field of medicine. The gravity and importance of these principles must be understood in the light of the awesome responsibility which rests upon those who care for the sick.

It can be stated without exaggeration that the study and practice of medicine are among the noblest pursuits to engage the mind and activity of man. The objective grandeur and sublimity inherent in the vocation to care for the sick are based upon the fact that the object with which medicine deals — a human being — is incomparably superior to the object of any other physical science. How strikingly and how beautifully the inspired writer of Holy Scripture portrays man as God's masterpiece of creation. "You have made him little less than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him rule over the works of your hands" (Ps. 8, 6-7).

Medicine, both as an art and as a science, concerns itself directly with a human being, the lord of earth's creatures. Relentlessly it pursues his welfare, both by curing sicknesses that have befallen him, and by preventing diseases to which he might become victim. Ceaselessly it aims at the mitigation and relief of pain, that unwelcome but inev-

itable companion of all illness. The helpless infant crying in the night, the vigorous youth in the vitality of his growing years, the sturdy adult in the full bloom of maturity, the decrepit old man in the failing strength of advanced age — yes, the limits of the province of medicine are only those of humanity itself. In the striking words of the poet:

“A wise physician, skilled our wounds to heal
Is more than armies to the public weal.” (Pope)

It is because physicians are such inestimable benefactors of mankind, that they have always held so eminent a position of deference and honor among barbarian tribes no less than in civilized communities, harking back over the centuries to the days of Hippocrates, the father of medicine. The inspired author of Holy Scripture speaks of the physician with the highest esteem and commendation: “Hold the physician in honor, for he is essential to you, and God it was Who established his profession. From God the doctor has his wisdom . . .” (Sir. 38, 1-2).

Divine Physician Is Pattern

In the practice of medicine, the pattern upon which you must closely model your lives, I submit, is that of the Divine Physician, Jesus Christ. No one who ever lived understood the dignity of the human personality so deeply as did Jesus Christ. For He shed His blood unto death on Calvary in order that we might have everlasting life. His evaluation of the human person must permeate every physician who professes Christ as his model. It is because a human person is, as one writer put it, “a syllable in that Word God spoke in the unbeginning of eternity . . . a branch in that Vine God planted in time, setting it out on a Judean hillside that it might one day climb the trellis of the Cross . . . a living stone in that temple whose cornerstone is the never dying Christ . . . a member of that Body whose Head is God of God, and true God of true God” (M. Raymond, *You*, p. 12). These are the reasons why every patient is deserving of reverence and respect, possessing as he does intangible realities that elude all mere physical tests and measurements.

The physician must see in each patient God-made-man. I speak not in merely metaphorical terms. For not only is this human being an image of God, but he is likewise a temple of the Holy Spirit, actually or potentially, by reason of the possession of divine grace, participating in the divine life itself, and thus is “a breath of God in a vessel of clay.” Did not our Divine Lord Himself declare: “As long as you did it for one of these, the least of My brethren, you did it for Me”? (Mt. 25,40). And so, in a helpless child in a hospital ward completely dependent upon others, you must see the Divine Infant of Bethlehem. In the terror-stricken patient whose mind is torn with anguish, you

must see the agonized Christ of Gethsemane. In the wreck of humanity whose body is lacerated with wounds and tortured with pain, you must see the suffering Savior of Golgotha. Perhaps it takes gigantic faith to see Christ in such awfully human forms. But then too, it took gigantic faith for the Wise Men to see God in a stable, and for the centurion to see God on a gibbet.

In imitation of Jesus Christ, you must bring to the sickroom something of the gentleness, tenderness, sympathy, compassion and understanding of the Divine Physician. "Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God . . . and thy neighbor as thyself." "And who is my neighbor?" And then our Divine Lord related the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10, 30-37). Have you ever paused to reflect upon the fact that this parable — surely the most touching in all the Gospel pages, filled up and overflowing with divine understanding and sympathy and compassion and love — has been preserved for mankind by the pen of St. Luke, the physician?

I have said that the physician must imitate Christ's profound appreciation of the dignity of the human personality. He must imitate Christ's gentleness and tenderness and understanding. But also he must imitate Christ's inflexible and uncompromising opposition to evil. "No man can serve two masters" (Mt. 6, 24). "He who is not with Me is against Me" (Mt. 12, 30). And of His Apostles and their successors: "He who hears you, hears Me. He who rejects you, rejects Me" (Luke 10, 16).

For a physician to imitate Christ's opposition to evil demands a profound and deep-rooted conviction and a conscientious implementation of the fundamental truths of medical ethics. While this is not the occasion to expatiate at any great length upon the principles of medical ethics, it is not inopportune to call attention to a message once given by Pope Pius XII in reference to what he described as the three basic ideas of medical ethics:

- 1) Medical ethics must be based on objective reality and on nature. This stems from the fact that medical ethics must conform to the essence of human nature and to its laws and intrinsic relations. All moral norms, including those of medicine, are necessarily derived from corresponding ontological principles. This is why a purely positivistic medical ethics is self-contradictory.
- 2) Medical ethics must be in conformity with reason and finality.
- 3) Medical ethics must have its roots in the transcendental. The absolute character of moral demands remains constant, whether man heeds them or not. The ultimate authority is the Creator Himself: God. If it were a question of principles devised by the will of man alone, then their binding force would have no more power than men have. They could be applied today and discarded tomorrow. When they are considered in the light of the Creator's authority,

however, the whole complexion changes. And the basic principles of medical ethics are a part of the divine law. (Cf. *The Pope Speaks*, Vol. 1, n. 4, pp. 347 et seq.).

In our day, to a greater extent perhaps than in any other period in history, those whose vocation is the field of medicine are experiencing an incessant and unrelenting bombardment upon morality. No longer does a blush of shame accompany the advocacy of truly horrendous crimes. License has usurped the place of liberty, and the proponents of immorality of every kind would substitute the passions of men for the law of God. Over and over again, physicians are being told that their freedom to think and to act is being circumscribed and destroyed by the taboos of a hopelessly old-fashioned and medieval Church, which is preposterously out of tune with modern methods and modern needs. They must adapt their principles to the thinking of the world of the moment, it is asserted — if indeed there are such things as principles at all.

Three decades ago the distinguished scholar in the field of cultural history and the philosophy of religion, Christopher Dawson, in one of his Gifford lectures at Edinburgh, made this foreboding statement: "The recovery of moral control and the return to spiritual order have now become the indispensable conditions of human survival."

Even a superficial acquaintance with the contemporary scene gives ample evidence that there has been no recovery of moral control, no return to spiritual order. And if human survival was critical three decades ago, there is every evidence that in the intervening period the situation has progressively worsened. There are indeed many students of contemporary society who are convinced that civilization is teetering on the precipice of disaster.

The words of Malcolm Muggeridge, for example, give ample food for reflection: "... we can survive energy crises, inflation, wars, revolution and insurrections, as they have been survived in the past; but if we transgress against the very basis of our moral existence, become our own gods in our own universe, then we shall surely and deservedly perish from the earth" (Malcolm Muggeridge, "What the Abortion Argument is About," *Human Life Review*, Vol. I, n. 3, p. 6).

A Special Concern

What especially concerns me as a bishop of the Catholic Church — and, I am sure, concerns you as Catholic physicians striving to practice the art of medicine in conformity with authentic ethical and moral standards — is the gradual ignoring in our society of any absolute and changeless ethical and moral standards at all.

Just a few years ago, Cardinal Joseph Hoffner, Archbishop of Cologne, expressed this thought very clearly and very forcefully. He

said: "In every age men have rebelled against the laws of morality which they find written in their consciences. The ideal and the reality have always been miles apart. But as long as the gap was recognized with honesty, there was always hope; the prodigal son could return to his father. Today, however, the norms of morality are questioned fundamentally, to the extent that they are no longer considered valid but rejected out of hand as so many taboos and ideological superstructures restricting knowledge. Morality has been reduced to the level of a product sponsored by psychology and sociology. Values are replaced by whatever is in current demand" (Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, Aug. 1, 1974).

All of us know that there are some persons who consider the ultimate basis of all morality to lie in custom or in human legislation. According to this theory — the theory of positivism — all actions are good or bad, only because human beings have decided to consider them such, or because civil laws have determined that it should be so. If this were true, inevitably it would follow that actions which are morally good at one time may become morally bad at another time, and vice versa.

The fact is, however, that while some obligations belong to this category (and hence are changeable), nevertheless there are many other actions that are good or bad of their very nature. And hence their morality cannot change.

This intrinsic morality is based upon human nature as such, considered in all its relationships — to God, to neighbor, to self. Ultimately, of course, the norm of human conduct is the divine nature itself, for it is to God's image and likeness that man has been made.

Once this fact of the basis of morality is clearly understood, it can be seen that there is an objective, immutable distinction between good and evil. That being so, actions which are intrinsically evil remain such, regardless of the motive for which they are performed. A good or noble motive or intention on the part of a person who performs some action cannot render that action morally good if, of its nature, it is morally evil. The end does not justify the means.

What is to be said of the authority of the Church in regard to norms of morality? As Catholics, we believe that Jesus Christ founded His Church in order to lead men and women to eternal supernatural salvation. The Church has the right and the obligation to teach the moral law, because observance of the moral law is an indispensable requisite for the attaining of salvation.

I need not tell you that today, unfortunately, there are many — some even within the Church — who deny the magisterium, i.e., the teaching authority of Christ's Vicar on earth and of the bishops, successors of the Apostles, who are united with the Pope. This seems to be especially true where matters of the natural law are concerned.

Nowhere have I seen more lucidly stated the authority of the Church to teach the moral law, than in the words of the late Pope Paul VI: "No believer will wish to deny that the teaching authority of the Church is competent to interpret even the natural moral law. It is, in fact, indisputable . . . that Jesus Christ, when communicating to Peter and to the Apostles His divine authority and sending them to teach all nations His commandments, constituted them as guardians and authentic interpreters of all the moral law, not only, that is, of the law of the Gospel, but also of the natural law, which is also an expression of the will of God, the faithful fulfillment of which is equally necessary for salvation" (*Humanae Vitae*, n. 4).

Vatican Council II stated unambiguously: ". . . in forming their conscience the faithful must pay careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ, and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself" (*Dignitatis humanae*, n. 14).

Let me stress also that the authentic teaching of the Church is not confined to infallible statements uttered *ex cathedra* by the Pope. Again, the consistent doctrine of the Church has been reaffirmed by Vatican Council II. After pointing out the obligation to accept the teaching of the Pope and the bishops who are united with him, in matters of faith and morals, the Council went on to declare that "religious submission of will and of mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 25).

One sometimes hears it stated that no one — no individual, no institution — has the right to foist his or its views upon society as a whole. After all, we do live in a pluralistic society.

In a very brilliant essay Father Francis Canavan has pointed out that "this is only another way of saying that society has no right to have a moral standard, but it is an assumption which most of those who make it do not consistently hold. Civilization depends upon the civilized imposing their beliefs and standards on the barbarians within, as well as without, the gates . . . If an object is within the scope of state power, as is the protection of human life . . . then, a view of the value of human life cannot be ruled out of consideration merely because it is taught by a church. To say that it should be excluded from public discussion is a species of secularist bigotry: religious believers, as citizens, may enter the public forum and take part in the debate on the laws; *but they must check their consciences at the door and talk as if they are secularists while they are within*" (Francis Canavan, "Law and Society's Conscience," *Human Life Review*, Vol. II, n. 1, p. 5).

Justification of Expenditures

Foisting one's views upon society as a whole? Well, how can the pro-abortionists justify the expenditure of millions and millions of dollars — your money and mine — by the federal and state governments, to pay for the killing of unborn babies? Not only is such killing a moral crime that is contrary to your conscience and mine and that of millions of others, but pro-abortionists demand that you and I must pay for these killings. Is it not obvious that those who believe in abortion are not only foisting their opinion upon the public, but, over and above that, are making all of us — including pro-life advocates — pay for the implementation of their beliefs?

All of us are acquainted with the surfeit of surveys that tabulate the opinions of the persons interviewed — frequently on questions that can be described as “medico-moral,” and hence of very great interest to the Catholic physician. The implication of these surveys seems to be that what a majority of persons considers to be morally permissible is, in fact, morally permissible — morality by counting heads.

I care not about the most sophisticated and scientific sociological surveys ever devised. Surveys cannot constitute a moral norm. If accurate, they may be able to tell us what people are thinking and how people are acting — but they cannot, merely on the basis of numbers, make such thinking or such acting morally right.

Nor is basic morality to be considered the end product of consensus or compromise. The Ten Commandments need no consensus; they must never be compromised. Morality does not start with the question of what modern men and women will accept as true. Rather it begins with the nature and the content of the true and the good — whether modern men and women will accept it or not. (Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, “Corrections for the New Morality,” summarized in *Theology Digest*, Vol. 21, n. 3, p. 230.)

I am fully aware, of course, that in our world a very high value is placed on freedom — and rightly so. Nevertheless the concept of freedom can be so exaggerated that some people begin to believe that their “freedom of conscience” allows them to decide for themselves, and infallibly, what is morally right and what is morally wrong. But the fact is that conscience can only discover and impose moral dictates. Conscience has no power to constitute or to create moral norms.

Morality by counting heads? Must we accept as morally permissible, for example, pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relationships, if a majority in secular society does? Jesus Christ did not.

Must we abandon our conviction about the indissolubility of marriage, because the divorce rate is becoming higher and higher, and more and more people accept divorce as legitimate? Jesus Christ did not.

Do embezzlement and assault and rape and murder become permissible, if a majority seems to think that they are?

Four years ago there was published a comprehensive survey, financed by several of the largest foundations in the country. What that survey revealed, with regard to the attitude of American youth toward morality, is nothing short of shocking. For instance, less than half the young regard clean moral living as having any significance whatsoever. (Cf. *Columbia*, Aug., 1974, p. 4.) Do you mean to tell me that therefore all of us must accept that opinion as genuine truth?

Pope Paul's Warning

Would to God that all would heed the warning of the late Pope Paul VI: "Today the norm of morality turns towards behavior, that is, towards current practice, towards the fashion of ethical behavior. Yesterday it was behavior that tried to adapt itself to the moral norm; today it is the opposite. If behavior dictates the law, the law no longer really exists in its intrinsic vigor, and behavior is caught up in a process of degradation. It becomes changeable and provisional. . . . This relativistic mentality, which seems to have its justification in the freedom characteristic of a so-called mature society, can easily degenerate into license and be the ruin of the community and of the persons that make it up. It would not be difficult to bring forward outstanding historical examples . . ." (*The Teachings of Pope Paul VI*, 1973, p. 130).

You are Catholic physicians. I beg you, in God's name, give witness to the world of what a Catholic physician should be. Never, in all history, did the world so sorely need it.

Sixteen centuries ago the learned and eloquent St. John Chrysostom cried out: "There would be no more pagans in our country, if we were real Christians" (In *Ep. ad Tim.*, c. 3, hom. 10, p. 62, col. 661).

It is the challenge of our Faith to give witness to that Faith by what we say and by what we do.

This is the challenge so clearly articulated by Vatican Council II: "Wherever they live, all Christians are bound to show forth, by the example of their lives and by the witness of their speech, that new man which they put on at Baptism, and that power of the Holy Spirit by Whom they were strengthened at Confirmation. Thus other men, observing their good works, can glorify the Father" (*Ad gentes*, n. 11).

Such is the challenge that I leave with you today.